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Defending Press Freedom in Reports on Rewald Case

Speaking of the First Amendment, the Federal Communications Commission protected the cause of freedom of the press when it rejected a complaint by the Central Intelligence Agency that had to do with the Ron Rewald case.

The CIA charged that ABC News had violated the fairness doctrine and the FCC's personal attack rule in television reports on the CIA's alleged involvement with Rewald's defunct investment firm. The CIA requested a full retraction — ABC had issued a partial retraction — and consideration of the issue when the company's radio and TV station licenses were considered for renewal.

The chief of the FCC's mass media bureau rejected the complaint, noting that newscasts are exempt from the personal attack rule. He said the CIA had failed to show that ABC knowingly distorted news programming or did not present contrasting views on the issue. The commission, the ruling said, is not "prepared to judge the wisdom, accuracy or adequacy with which particular news coverage may have been handled on the air."

There have been many reports in this newspaper and in the national news media about CIA involvement with Rewald, and the end is not in sight. We cannot vouch for the accuracy of all such reports. And we have cautioned that the attempt to tie the CIA more closely with Rewald seemed to be aimed at obscuring the charges against him of defrauding investors of millions of dollars.

However, it is not the proper role of government in a free society to evaluate the accuracy of the news media and discipline errant practitioners of journalism. The First Amendment was intended to prevent that sort of thing. The FCC, in overseeing the operation of the electronic media, would have overstepped its proper limits and set a dangerous precedent if it had approved the CIA request.